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In the Wild Man's Land: or, With Frank Reade, Jr., in the Heart of Australia.

By "NONAME."



Our friends managed to retreat until waist deep in the lake water. Here they could not be attacked from the rear. One volley drove the foe back many yards. Another and another forced them back still more. So rapidly did the repeaters work that the cannibals were met with one overwhelming shower of bullets which laid them low by the dozen.

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In the Wild Man's Land;

OR,

With Frank Reade, Jr., in the Heart of Australia.

A STORY OF WILD ADVENTURE.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Across the Earth," "Along the Orinoco," "The Coral Labyrinth," "Over Two Continents,"
"Across the Desert of Fire," etc., etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

WHICH OPENS THE STORY.

WE are bound to associate the name of Australia with romance and adventure, the land of wild men and strange, fierce animals.

The Antipodes hold a magic charm for the adventurer or explorer, and thither many have turned their steps, some never to return. Wonderful quarter of the earth's surface.

Frank Reade, Jr., known the world over as a famous explorer and inventor, had just completed his new air-ship, the "Swallow." The problem of aerial navigation which for so many centuries has engrossed the minds of great men was solved, and by this talented young man whose fame was at once assured.

The "Swallow," as Frank had named the air-ship, was a marvelous product of inventive genius.

A mighty crowd of people had visited Readestown to witness the trial trip. The air-ship ascended to the limit of the atmosphere, or as far as human life could be supported. It sailed over an area of many square miles and finally descended into Readestown and was voted a success.

A number of distinguished men accompanied Frank.

Now that he had completed his air-ship, it was in order for Frank to plan an expedition to some far corner of the earth.

Barney and Pomp, the Celt and the African, his two faithful followers, were delighted with the prospect of a trip in the air.

"Bejabers!" cried Barney, as he threw a handspring, "I'd loike to take a thrip to that part av the worruld which is jest unther us! Shure, an' wouldn't that be Chiny, Misther Frank?"

"The Antipodes," exclaimed Frank. "Barney, your suggestion gives me an idea. China would be an interesting part of the world, but there is Australia, the land of the marsupial and the wild man. Why not try a trip among the wild men?"

"Golly, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, rolling his eyes, "yo' don' mean dem kin' ob cannibals wha' eat people?"

"I guess not," said Frank, with a laugh; "the wild men of Australia or the bushmen are not said to be cannibals. They are very fierce and cunning, though. The North American Indian is nothing to them!"

"Begorra, I don't see how they cud do us any harm, bein' as we're aboard the air-ship," said Barney.

"Oh, we need not fear them to any great extent," declared Frank, "but we will think it over. In the meanwhile it will be well to fit the air-ship out with provisions and get her ready for an immediate start. Will you look out for that, Barney?"

"I will, sor!"

"Very well. We may decide to start at any time."

Frank hastened away across the yards of the great machine works. In a few moments he was in a high roofed building where the air-ship sat upon rollers, all completed and ready to be rolled out into the air.

He took a look over the new invention to see that all was right. And this gives us a good opportunity to describe her to the reader.

The Swallow was built somewhat upon the lines of an ocean greyhound or transatlantic steamer, with commodious hull, narrow beam and great depth of hold.

Her hull was of thinly rolled and tough alloy of aluminum and steel, and bullet proof.

As lightness must be combined with strength in an air-ship, Frank had selected this as the best material. Certainly the Swallow had a buoyant appearance.

Her side was pierced with dead eye windows, admitting light to the hold. Her cabins, two in number, were above the main deck. They were provided with plate glass windows and skylights, and were richly furnished.

A high railing of steel network protected the deck fore and aft. In this were small loopholes through which the voyagers could fire in case of an attack. There was also a gate leading to a rope gangway by means of which one could descend from the deck.

Forward was a pilot-house which contained the steering gear and the electric keyboard by means of which the engines were controlled.

For the motive power was electricity supplied from a storage battery, the construction of which was a secret of Frank Reade, Jr.'s. At the stern of the air-ship was a four-bladed propeller, with an enormous scope and power.

The ascending power of the air-ship was due to three huge rotascopes.

These were constructed of steel, aluminum and wood, and their fanning power was such that an object six times the weight of the air-ship could be raised with ease.

These rotascopes were placed upon hollow masts about forty or fifty feet above the deck. In the mast was the rapidly revolving shaft which drove the rotascopes at any rate of speed desired.

To describe all the appointments of the air-ship in detail would require a great length of time.

Suffice it to say that all its equipments were perfect and its furnishings luxurious. The cabins were provided with all comforts and conveniences. The electric machinery was powerfully constructed and worked like a charm.

Barney was the pilot and always to be found at the keyboard.

Pomp was the steward, cook, and general man of all work aboard the vessel. Both men knew their business and their places well.

Frank's orders were obeyed to the letter, and the supplies and provisions for a long cruise were placed aboard the air-ship.

In less than two days Barney and Pomp reported that she was all ready for the aerial cruise.

Frank was besieged with letters and even personal applications from men of all classes all over the country for passage aboard the Swallow upon her coming cruise.

Large sums of money were offered, many promises and even threats made, but Frank said:

"I am going to weather this experience alone. Barney and Pomp shall be my only companions."

And he stuck to his resolution.

One day, before anybody in Readestown was up, the air ship sprung into the air, and started on her famous voyage to the land of the wild men.

Frank had laid his course out definitely.

From Readestown he would proceed to San Francisco. Thence in a direct line to Honolulu. Thence to New Hebrides, and due west to Australia, reaching that continent in the vicinity of Brisbane.

This would involve a long flight over the great Pacific, but it was the shortest and most direct route.

Barney and Pomp were hilarious with the prospect before them.

"Bejabbers, I'm itchin' to have a look at the wild men in Borneo," he cried. "Shure, they must be quare-lukin' vagabones!"

"Hole on, chile!" corrected Pomp; "we ain' gwine to Borneo. Dey am de wild men ob Australia."

"Devil the odds so long as they air the ginniywine wild men," cried Barney. "Phwat do I care whether they cum from Borneo or from Africky!"

With which the Celt grinned sardonically at the darky. Pomp's eyes rolled.

"Wha' dat, sah? Hab yo' to undahstan' dere am no mo' wild men in Africa den dere is in Ireland, sah."

"Whurroo!" cried Barney; "is it an insult yez will be after doin' me native soil, sor?"

"Yo' was de fus' one fo' to gib me de insult, sah."

"Will yez take it back?" cried the Celt, threateningly.

Now if there was one thing the two delighted in it was a rough and tumble wrestle. While they were the best of friends, each delighted in nagging and joking the other.

Neither was serious, though their manner might have led one to think so. This was an opportunity neither lost.

"I ain' gwine fo' to take nuffin' back, sah," grunted Pomp, defiantly.

They glared at each other.

Then Barney made a biff at Pomp. The darky dodged it and shook his head like a mad bull.

"Look out dar, chile. Don' yo' trubble me or yo' be sorry. Hi-hi—look out dar!"

Pomp dodged another blow and then the fun began. He lowered his head quick as a flash and made a dive for the Celt.

Barney dodged, but was not quite quick enough.

The darky's head took him in the side and made him grunt. But he grabbed the coon by the shoulders and a tough wrestle ensued.

Down they went upon the air-ship's deck, rolling over and over, tugging, panting and struggling.

The Swallow at the moment was two thousand feet in air and sailing westward with her wheel lashed. There was no perceptible breeze, consequently no danger.

Frank Reade, Jr., was in the after cabin studying some charts so that he knew nothing of the fracas.

For full ten minutes the two jokers rolled about the deck, tugging and gasping furiously. It was an even thing, advantage lying with neither for a long while.

Then both grew so weak and exhausted that all they could do was to lie upon the deck and glare at each other.

"Yo' gwine ter 'polygize to me, sah?" whispered Pomp.

"Devil a bit!" huskily retorted Barney. "I niver apologized to a naygur yit—bad cess to yez!"

With this Pomp made another dash at Barney. But at that moment a thrilling cry rang through the brain of each.

"Hello, the air-ship!"

In an instant they scrambled to their feet.

The cry had seemed to come from the great void about them. It certainly was not Frank Reade, Jr.'s voice.

And the air-ship was full two thousand feet from the earth. The cry could not have come from that source.

The two jokers looked at each other with something like superstitious fear. What did it mean?

CHAPTER II.

THE YOUNG AERONAUT.

FRANK READE, JR., in the cabin had also heard the strange hail, and came running out in surprise.

He saw Barney and Pomp standing dumfounded on the deck, and cried:

"Did you hear anybody hail the air-ship?"

"Shure, sor, an' we did," replied Barney. "Was it yesilf spakin', sor?"

"Certainly not," replied Frank. "Ah!"

At that moment the strange hail came again.

"Ahoy, the air-ship!"

Frank looked up and around, and for a moment could see nothing to explain the phenomenon.

Then he gave a start.

Far up in the verge of a white cloud which hung overhead he saw a dark object. It looked like a huge basket hanging out of the white bank. Over the edge of the basket a face was seen.

"Hello, the air-ship!"

"Hello!" returned Frank in utter amazement. "Who the deuce are you, and how did you come up there?"

"I am Con Hardy, of Briartown, New York," was the reply. "I am hung up here and can go neither up nor down, for my valve cord is broken."

"What!" exclaimed Frank. "You are in a balloon?"

"Certainly."

In a moment all was clear to the young inventor. He recognized in the incident the predicament of a luckless aeronaut.

"Wait a moment, Mr. Hardy," he cried. "I think we can help you."

"Thank heaven!" cried the young aeronaut. "I had begun to fear that my fate was settled forever."

Frank went into the pilot house and touched the rotoscope lever. The air-ship sprung up like a bird.

In an instant she was in the cloud, and through its haze the proportions of the balloon could be seen.

It was made after the approved fashion, but the basket was commodious and equipped with all the conveniences necessary for an extended trip in the air.

The inventor had certainly displayed much genius in this line. Mr. Con Hardy was the only occupant of the basket.

Consequently Frank took it for granted that he was the owner and manufacturer as well of the balloon.

The air-ship ascended above the balloon, taking care to avoid fouling the rigging of each. Then Frank cried:

"Do you wish to come aboard, Mr. Hardy?"

"I would be delighted."

"Stand by there and we will send down two ropes. Fasten one to your balloon—we will draw you up on the other."

"Bother the balloon!" replied Hardy; "let her go! She will never be of any use to me again. I don't care if I never see her again, for she has nearly cost me my life!"

"Then we will let her go adrift?"

"Yes; I will take what effects I desire and need."

"We will do as you say."

"Let it be so then."

"All right."

Down came the rope. It was swung over into the basket so that Mr. Hardy could get it.

Then the young aeronaut, for he was a mere boy, swung himself clear of the basket.

The balloon shot upward, narrowly avoiding a collision with the Swallow. Barney and Pomp pulled the rescued youth aboard.

Con Hardy came over the rail of the Swallow and stood before his rescuers.

He was seen to be a tall handsome youth of twenty years or so. He bowed with a grateful manner to Frank and said:

"I owe you my life. I know that the old balloon was getting rotten and would have burst sooner or later. Ah, there she goes!"

There was a dull report overhead. The next moment the collapsed balloon shot down toward the earth.

All shivered at the sight. Truly it had been a close call for Hardy.

"I am very glad we came upon you as we did," said Frank. "Certainly the hand of Providence was in it."

"Indeed, you are right," agreed Hardy. "You can imagine my surprise when I looked down and saw beneath me what I had never dreamed of as being possible, an air-ship. Are you the owner and inventor of this wonderful creation, sir? Do I really stand upon the deck of an air-ship, or am I dreaming?"

Frank smiled at this.

"You are facing a reality, sir," he said, "this is a real air-ship. I am Frank Reade, Jr., her owner and inventor."

"Frank Reade, Jr.," cried Hardy, with a ring of joy in his voice.

"Why, you are my patron saint. I have read much of you, and it was reading of you that gave me inspiration for attempting a journey across the continent in my balloon. This is the greatest joy of my life to meet you."

"The pleasure is mutual," said Frank. "You are very welcome aboard the Swallow, and we will be pleased to land you safely at any point you may desire."

"Thank you," replied Hardy; "that is indeed kind. May I ask what is your destination?"

"Many thousands of miles from here," replied Frank. "We are going to pay a visit to the heart of Australia."

Hardy's eyes glistened.

"Grand!" he exclaimed. "Oh, I wish I was going with you. What rare sights you will see!"

Frank now took Hardy about the air-ship, showing him its mechanism and its wonderful appointments.

The young balloonist was dumb with wonderment and admiration. When the tour of inspection was completed he managed to say:

"You are a wonderful man, sir. This air-ship is a marvelous triumph. There is no other man on earth who could hope to equal it."

"Easy," said Frank, with a laugh, "don't put it on too thick. However, I thank you for the compliment."

"And you are going to visit Australia?"

"Yes!"

"That will mean the crossing of the great Pacific Ocean. Wonderful trip! Why, it is worth a life time to take such a journey. One should be content to die after accomplishing it."

"That is a strong statement," protested Frank, "however, it will no doubt be an interesting experience."

Hardy drew a deep sigh and then turned to the deck. An impulse was upon him to make a proposition to Frank, and he would no doubt have done so, but at that moment a startling thing happened.

A loud sharp cry came from the pilot-house.

It was Barney's voice.

"Shure, Misther Frank, wud yez be after coming quick! There's the devil to pay, av it iver strikes us!"

"What now?" exclaimed Hardy. "Are we likely to run into something?"

Frank sprung into the pilot-house. Barney pointed through the plate glass window, and cried:

"Wud yez luk, sor! Shure, it's a fearful sthorm a-com'in'! If it iver sthrikes us we're up a sthump, sor!"

"You are right, Barney," exclaimed Frank, as he glanced anxiously at the barometer, "and it looks as if we would have hard work to avoid getting strung."

"Descend to the earth," cried Hardy. "Can you not do that?"

"No," replied Frank; "the storm is already under us!"

This was true.

The cyclone, for such it was, was sweeping the face of the earth below. Generally these storms were of no very great height.

But Frank saw that in this case there was a disturbance of the upper as well as the lower atmosphere. The storm seemed general.

For a moment he hesitated.

By ascending several miles he knew that it would be possible to escape the tempest. But this he disliked to do, as it brought the air ship into an atmosphere so rare that life could with difficulty be supported.

But there was scant time for decision.

The storm was howling down upon them. Frank cried:

"All in the cabin! I am going to close the doors."

He pressed a valve.

This instantly closed every door and window. Then he pressed the rotoscope lever. Up shot the air ship.

But Frank had waited just too long. He was a trifle late.

The storm swooped down like a destroying fiend before the Swallow had ascended one hundred yards. What followed was like a fearful dream.

The first shock was the worst. Had the air-ship been on the earth, or in a position to offer better resistance, every rotoscope would surely have been cleared from the deck.

But as it was she was picked up like a toy and whirled away through the clouds like a revolving top.

Through the flood of rain and hail she was hustled and hurled. No one of the voyagers could keep on his feet.

They were thrown about in the cabin like puppets on an electric disc, while the air-ship was wholly at the mercy of the furious storm.

It was a terrible ordeal.

What saved the air-ship from certain destruction was the fact that it offered very little resistance to the awful gale.

Whirled and driven, it finally rested in the verge of the storm drift, and suddenly emerged from the cyclone cloud, while the latter went howling and roaring on into the distance.

Frank had checked the rotoscope so that the Swallow now hung motionless in the upper atmosphere. The earth was visible many miles below, for the storm had swept away every cloud.

The sun was shining brightly in a clear sky. Swift as had been the coming of the cyclone, it was as swiftly over.

And the air-ship was practically unharmed. This was good cause for congratulation all around.

Frank let the Swallow descend into a warmer strata of the atmosphere. Then with a glass a view was taken of the country below.

It was seen that the storm had done frightful damage there. Trees were uprooted, houses blown to fragments, and a general scene of destruction was visible.

"I call it a lucky escape," said Con Hardy; "what do you say, Mr. Reade?"

"Indeed it was," replied Frank, "but now, Mr. Hardy, I must apologize for keeping you so long aboard. Where shall we land you?"

The young balloonist's face fell.

CHAPTER III.

ACROSS THE PACIFIC.

It was plain that young Hardy was loth to think of leaving the air-ship. For the first time Frank read this in his face, and was surprised.

He was up to this moment of the belief that Hardy was anxious to leave for his home and friends. But he plainly read the truth in the young man's face now.

Hardy shifted his position, appeared uneasy and finally stammered:

"I—I hardly know, Mr. Reade. I have not thought of it yet."

"Well," said Frank, "I will land you at the most convenient point you may name. I think at present that we are over the plains of Nebraska."

Hardy was silent a moment.

Then he said:

"You are going to Australia, Mr. Reade. Don't you want another man in your crew?"

Frank could not help a smile. He saw that Hardy's desire was a powerful one. He really liked the young balloonist much, and a resolution partly came over him. But he said:

"Barney and Pomp are all the crew I need!"

"But could you not make room for another man? I will gladly pay a good sum for the privilege. I very much desire to visit Australia."

"But I don't need another man," said Frank. "As for your money—I have no use for that."

Hardy's face fell.

"No. I suppose not," he said. "Well, I much regret that I cannot make one of your party. You have my prayers for your success. As for landing me, any town below will do. I can easily find my way home."

There was such a ring of disappointment in his voice that Frank was touched.

The young inventor walked to the rail and looked over. No town was in sight.

Then he went into the cabin. After a few moments he came out leisurely smoking a cigar, and said:

"Mr. Hardy, I have been thinking the matter over. You are quite anxious to visit Australia, are you?"

An eager light leaped into his eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Reade!" he cried; "will you really take me with you? I trust you will not be sorry. I will do all in my power to make myself useful. You shall not find me wanting."

"I do not require another man in my crew," said Frank, "but to tell the truth, Mr. Hardy, I have taken a liking to you. I have decided therefore to extend you an invitation to become my guest during this voyage."

"Mr. Reade—I—"

"Do you accept?"

"With all my heart. But—your extreme generosity—"

"Bother that!" cried Frank, with a ringing laugh. "I know we shall be good friends. But have you no word to send to your friends?"

"I will wire them from San Francisco," said Hardy; "that will do. I am the happiest man in the world to-day."

So the matter was settled.

Frank took a passenger with him after all, and he was destined not to be sorry for it.

Night now began to settle down. The darkness was intense, but by means of the search-light the air-ship was enabled to drift on.

The next day, so rapid was the progress made, the slopes of the Rocky mountains came into view. The scenery began to assume an air of great grandeur.

Day by day the Swallow traveled over this mighty panorama, unequalled by any other in the world.

In due course the peaks of the Sierras came into view, and beyond them was seen the limpid waters of the Pacific.

The air-ship sailed down the Sacramento Valley and alighted at an obscure town. From there Hardy was able to send a telegraph message to his folks, apprising them of his intention to visit Australia.

Frank did not visit the Golden Gate City, for he knew that he would be detained there by friends and those interested in the air-ship. And he was anxious to be on his way across the great Pacific.

So that as soon as the message was sent, the air-ship once more took flight and the wide sea was beneath them while the land rapidly sank from view as they made their westward way.

Soon naught was about them but the mighty expanse of water. They were in a direct line for Honolulu.

The air-ship was enabled to make the distance in much less time than a steamship, so that in a few days Frank sighted the island of Hawaii and announced:

"We are making good progress. At this rate we shall reach Australia in much less time than I had reckoned upon."

"Good!" cried Hardy. "I can hardly wait for the day to come!"

"The longest part of our voyage will be from Honolulu to the New Hebrides. Thence to Australia is but a short sail."

"Will you stop at Honolulu?"

"No!"

"Then our trip will be continuous?"

"Not exactly," replied Frank. "I mean to alight upon some coral isle, which is uninhabited to rest the machinery and give it an overhauling. I desire to avoid public receptions or curiosity such as we would have to encounter at Honolulu or any civilized port."

"I believe your plan is wise," replied Hardy. "I can understand your sentiments well, and do not blame you!"

So no stop was made at Honolulu.

They passed over the beautiful isles, however, and low enough so that a native hunter in the mountains fired a shot at them, which struck the air-ship's hull.

In the cane fields and plantations the appearance of the air-ship created a tremendous sensation.

The natives gathered in great crowds to watch the passage of the wonderful ship. No doubt many of them believed it an optical illusion.

Hardy amused himself with dropping briefly written messages down to them. These doubtless explained to the Hawaiians what was a great mystery.

"These are the islands which belong properly and naturally to the United States," declared Hardy; "here are more American interests than others."

"Bejabers, they never will whoil ould England has a finger in the pie," declared Barney. "Shure, she's the opprisor av all nations. Luk at how she has her fut on the neck av ould Oireland!"

"Golly, I done fot yo' was an American, sah," cried Pomp. "Did'n yo' take out you' naturalization papers?"

"Oireland's the land av me birth an' av me ancisters, an' I'm proud

av that same," cried Barney, "but fer that matther wud yez luk at how the British Lion is opprisin' the poor blacks in Afriky. Shure, the lasht thing we've heard of was the bloody redcoats slaughterin' a thousand or more av the poor Ashantees, an' makin' the king av them hug the knees av a British officer. An' that all bekase the poor Ashantees wudn't give up the land which was the property av their ascisters afore them!"

Pomp rolled his eyes.

"Shure, av coarse they cud shoot the poor divils down," continued Barney, "an' divil a bit of trouble wid their masheen guns. Divil a thing but murdher ivery bit av it. God rest the souls av the poor haythins. Shure, it's yure own counthrymen, Misher Pomp, an' bad cess to yez if ye don't sthand by them!"

"Huh! I'se an American citizen, I is," said Pomp. "P'raps mah ancestors did cum from Africky, but I'se clean gone an' turned American, I has."

"Och hone, an' phwere is yer loyalty to yer native land?" scoffed Barney. "It's a turncoat yez are, like ivery naygur! But yez niver see an Oirishman go back on his native soil, nor yez never will! Thru to the last!"

Hardy winked at Frank, and Pomp, anxious to drop the subject, hurried off to the galley to prepare dinner.

The air ship was now in the very heart of the Pacific.

Every day they were nearing the Equator. Once that was crossed the greater part of the journey was over.

The air ship had made wonderful and steady progress.

She had been continuously in the air for weeks. From Honolulu to the Equator the Pacific was almost an unbroken expanse.

But one day a small isle was sighted, and the air ship held down for it.

It appeared to be uninhabited, and Frank therefore said:

"We will stop here for a rest and to examine the machinery."

"Good!" cried Hardy, "it will be quite a relief to get out and stretch one's legs."

"So it will."

"Begorra, av there's any hunting on that isle yez will foind me aither it," cried Barney.

"I'se wif yo', I'sh!"

Frank looked for a good landing place, and finally selected a spot upon a high cliff overlooking a little cove.

Down upon this the air ship settled and rested upon the ground.

Anchors were thrown out. The machinery came to a stop and then all sprang over the rail and stood upon the earth.

They felt much as one feels after having been long at sea. But this was soon overcome.

Part of the isle was densely wooded. There was every indication that plenty of game might be found.

Frank at once said:

"I shall be busy with the machinery. The rest of you must amuse yourselves as you see fit. Hardy, you are fond of exploring. Why not take a tour of the isle?"

"I had thought of that," replied the young balloonist.

"That will be diversion for you then."

"But I would like your company."

"That will be impossible," said Frank. "So go along, all of you. But look out for cannibals!" and he laughed.

So Hardy, with Barney and Pomp, started to explore the island.

They went well armed with rifles and pistols. Into the palm forest they made their way.

At every step some new object of interest claimed their attention.

But contrary to their expectations, the island seemed devoid of animal life. Only a few wild goats and rabbits were seen.

But there was a lake or basin of water in the center of the isle which seemed alive with wild fowl. These furnished rare sport.

Thus far no sign of human life had been seen. If there were cannibals on the isle they had not showed themselves. But a surprise was in store.

CHAPTER IV.

A RUB WITH CANNIBALS.

BARNEY was making his way along the sandy shore of the lake when he gave a start of surprise.

"Mither presarve us!" he gasped. "Phwat's that?"

There in the soft sand were footprints. They were of prodigious size, and were the bare feet of human beings. There was no doubt of this.

Barney's eyes stuck out in sheer amazement and terror.

Then he called to his companions.

"Come here, will yez?" he called. "Shure I've med a diskivery!" Pomp and Hardy came up quickly. They were also astonished.

"Well, I should say so!" exclaimed Hardy. "Frank thought the island was uninhabited."

"Whist!" exclaimed Barney seriously. "Phwat if they are cannibals?"

Pomp rolled his eyes in virtuous horror and dismay. He looked about as if expecting to see a cannibal behind every palm tree.

"Golly!" he exclaimed. "I done fink we bettah go back to de airship dreckly!"

But Hardy only smiled grimly and proceeded to follow the trail. It was soon mixed up with several others. As near as the young balloonist could make out a dozen or more of the natives had passed that way.

Now Hardy was a daring young spirit, and moreover his curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I'd like to have a look at those chaps!"

"Begorra, but they may eat us up!" protested Barney.

"Golly! we bettah fin' out wha' Marse Frank fink ob it."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Hardy, tensely. "I hope you are not cowards. Come along and don't give way to childish fear!"

The young balloonist hit the right chord then. At once Barney and Pomp braced up.

"Reckon I ain' 'fraid," sniffed Pomp, looking at the chamber of his rifle. "Ain' no passel ob nasty cannibals gwine to skeer dis chile!"

"Begorra they'll crack their jaws on a hard nut whin they ate me," cried Barney; "bad cess to them! Here's aither them!"

"Good!" cried Hardy, with alacrity; "that's the way to talk! Now we'll give the cannibals a hot fight if they dare to tackle us!"

"Whurroo!" cried Barney, "I'm wid yez!"

"Golly! I'se yo' huckleberry, sah!"

"I don't believe they will prove unfriendly," said Hardy; "it is my opinion they will make friends with us."

Then all stood still.

Through the palm grove a score of black forms were flitting. The next moment the cannibals came into view.

Nearly naked, powerful barbarians they were, armed with javelins and shields. They seemed petrified with astonishment at sight of the white men.

It was a tableau.

For full a minute they stood silently regarding the three voyagers. Then simultaneously a yell went up from their lips.

They brandished their weapons as if to make an attack. Barney and Pomp would have raised their weapons, but Hardy said:

"Easy! Not yet! They invite us to make the attack. That we must not do. We will defend ourselves."

When the cannibals saw that the visitors were peaceably disposed they changed their tactics at once.

They ceased shouting, and laying down their assegais, advanced with open palms upheld.

Hardy at once saw that this was a sign of peace, so he made reply in the same manner.

"Keep your eyes open for treachery," he said. "Let them be the first to make the attack, however."

The islanders were now at close quarters, and met the voyagers with a curious mixture of gabble which was quite unintelligible.

Hardy tried to establish a system of sign talk with them, but was unable to do so. They were an intensely low and treacherous gang.

Before many moments it also became patent that they meant mischief. It was plainly quite useless to attempt to make friends with them.

This caused Hardy no little trepidation. He began to apprehend trouble and this came sooner than he expected.

The cannibals pressed nearer, repeating their villainous gabble and glaring saucily at the voyagers. One of them tried to take Barney's hat from his head.

The Celt objected and there was a slight scuffle. This created some excitement.

Hardy spoke loud and sharp words of reproof, but of course, they were not understood. His manner seemed to give the cannibals the cue.

"Be me sowl!" gritted Barney. "I'd like to have wan good crack at that omadhoun. I'd spile his chances fer a good photograff!"

"Golly! I reckon we'se gwine ter hab trubble yere putty quick," said Pomp.

"Steady!" admonished Hardy, "keep your eyes open. When I give the word to fire, shoot down every black rascal near you!"

The three voyagers had all this while been slowly retreating along the sandy beach. But the cannibals pressed upon them persistently.

They swarmed all about the three men, and there was no longer any doubt as to their intentions. The situation was quite a serious one.

"A case of hog," gritted Hardy. "Well, they shall have a hard fight, confound them!"

Nearer pressed the cannibals. Suddenly Hardy saw the signal given.

It was but natural that the cannibals should make the attack. They could count upon easily overcoming the three men with their superior numbers.

But they made a bit of a mistake. Numbers do not equal quality, and the latter force was with our friends.

"Look out!" shouted Hardy; "they mean to attack us. Keep your eyes open! Give it to them!"

One of the cannibals made a thrust at Hardy with his assegai. Instantly the young aeronaut shot him dead.

Barney and Pomp opened a hot fire. Then the battle opened.

Our friends managed to retreat until waist deep in the lake water. Here they could not be attacked from the rear.

One volley drove the foe back many yards. Another and another forced them back still more.

So rapidly did the repeaters work that the cannibals were met with one overwhelming shower of bullets which laid them low by the dozen.

The slaughter was terrific. So demoralized did the wretches in-

stantly become, that they did not attempt to use their own weapons, but broke and ran.

It was a signal victory.

Volley after volley sped after the cannibals. The Winchesters with their rapid fire had won the day.

Our friends could not help a cheer. Then they fired another volley.

By this time not one of the cannibals was in sight. The repulse was most effective.

But though triumphant, our friends did not become over sanguine. Hardy knew that it would be politic to let the fight rest here.

So he cried:

"Back to the air ship! We must get out of this place before they make it too hot for us!"

At once they started upon the retreat. It seemed an age before they again came in sight of the air-ship.

Meanwhile Frank Reade, Jr., had heard the firing and was in much of a quandary to know what to do.

He was intensely relieved when he saw his companions coming safely into view. He beckoned to them to hasten.

In a few moments they were at the rail.

"Well," cried Frank, "what did you run up against?"

"Cannibals!" replied Hardy; "but they will not feed off our carcases to-day. We repulsed them."

"Then the isle is inhabited?" asked Frank in dismay.

"I should say that it was. We came near being gobbled up."

"That settles it," cried Frank. "I am done inspecting the machinery. It is in fine order and needs no repairs. We will get out of here at once."

The adventurers clambered aboard and Frank touched the lever and sent the air-ship skyward just as the cannibals again appeared on the scene.

Then a laughable incident occurred.

Barney and Pomp leaned over the rail and thumbed noses at the natives until the vessel was far above the earth. This had a curious effect upon the natives.

They indulged in wild gestures, hurled their weapons into the air and yelled like veritable fiends. But, of course, this had no effect upon the aerial voyagers.

The coral isle grew less distinct and soon was but a speck upon the horizon.

"Now for a quick run to New Hebrides!" cried Frank. "In another week we should be in Australia."

This raised the spirits of all, and as the air-ship sped onward they were imbued with eager anticipation.

The days were fiercely hot and breathless. The nights balmy and a source of relief.

It was real tropical weather, and the voyagers were glad enough when the Equator was crossed. Two days later islands were sighted.

And now they began to encounter little archipelagoes without number, most of them being inhabited. Then they drifted along in the verge of the Coral Sea.

At last the New Hebrides were sighted. After them came New Caledonia.

"Now," cried Frank, "for the shores of Queensland. We shall soon have reached our destination."

Due west the air ship held its course. The next day a long dull line burst into hazy view.

It was the coast of Australia.

Our voyagers had reached the Antipodes at last. Every moment the coast line became plainer.

They saw before them that land of mystery and wonder, of gold and precious gems, of wild men and savage beasts.

It was a thrilling reflection that they were to visit those parts of the wonderful continent, which had thus far never been explored. What discoveries were before them, what new wonders were to be revealed, they could only conjecture, but the thought caused them an eager thrill.

CHAPTER V.

THE HEART OF AUSTRALIA.

THE air-ship rapidly drew nearer the coast.

Frank took an observation and made out that they were fifty miles or more north of Brisbane.

This was in the vicinity of Laguna Bay. All along the coast there were small towns.

Frank had no intention of stopping at any of these. His impulse was to penetrate at once into the wilderness.

So the air-ship kept on toward gigantic mountain ranges. Once over these farewell was taken of the sea.

It seemed a relief to the voyagers to at least have land beneath them once more. Hardy hung over the rail studying the country below.

There were towns and hamlets, plantations and cabins in the forests. People were seen at various occupations peculiar to the country, and all dropped their work to gaze astounded at the air-ship.

Frank made no signal to them, nor did he venture to descend. His purpose was to keep on into the interior.

When night came the air-ship was threading its way among the peaks of the Denham Range.

Beyond these was the long plain extending to the Warrego River. Thence on the wilderness lay before them.

The land of the bush and the boomerang, replete with perils unnamed, and promising adventure galore.

The mountains of Australia might safely be denoted the wildest in the world. All was a tangle of vegetation, and wild beasts of prey lurked in the fastnesses.

The search-light came into good play now. By its rays the peaks rising about could be descried and collision with them averted.

Barney and Pomp took turns in the pilot house at night. It was a post requiring extreme care and watchfulness.

But daylight came at last after the first night spent in Australia. Then the waters of the Warrego came into view.

All Australian rivers are shallow and have little water in them save in the wet season. Then they become roaring floods.

The Warrego therefore was nearly dry, and as the voyagers were gazing down into its bed, Hardy suddenly clutched Frank's arm and gasped:

"Do you see that?"

"What?" asked the young inventor.

"Down there—on that sand-bar. It looks like the body of a man. Can he be dead?"

Frank's eye now caught the object, and he was instantly excited. Certainly there in the mud was plainly visible a prostrate man.

The little bar upon which he lay was surrounded with shallow water. He was lying partly face downward.

He wore the rough garb of an Australian herder. That he was a white man seemed certain.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hardy, "it seems as if he needed help!"

"Stop the ship, Barney," cried Frank. "We must find out what is the matter with him."

So the Swallow descended until within twenty feet of the sand-bar. Then Frank stepped out upon the rope-ladder and descended.

He approached the prostrate man, and gave a start as he did so. Between the shoulders was a dart, such as is thrown by the bushmen of Central Australia.

It told the tragic story.

That dart was poisoned. The poor unfortunate was dead. There was no doubt of this.

Yet Frank turned him upon his back and felt his pulse. It was still. The man was a corpse.

There were other footprints on the bar. Wading to the shore, Frank found a trail which showed that quite a party of white men had here crossed.

The truth was plain.

They had been pursued by the wily bushmen. In crossing the river the black foe had fired upon them from behind.

The whites had lost at least one man. How many blacks had been killed in the encounter there was no telling.

Frank saw that nothing could be done for the dead man save to bury him. However, he did not stop to do this, for it occurred to him that the fleeing whites might stand in need of succor. Why not go ahead and yield it to the?"

He was resolved to do so. In fact it was only in line with common humanity.

* He knew that the position of the white explorers, pursued as they were by the wily bushrangers, must be of a most perilous sort. How could they hope to escape ultimate destruction?

The bushmen would certainly hang like wolves upon their heels until the last man was killed.

Frank knew the characteristics of these deadly natives well.

Like the harassing Cossacks, who were mainly responsible for Napoleon's defeat at Moscow, these rascals were always ready to strike a blow, but were never in a position to be struck themselves, being as elusive as will-o'-the-wisps.

Who the white explorers were could hardly be guessed.

They might be government surveyors, or a hardy band of pioneers or hunters, or perchance gold seekers. In any event they stood sorely in need of help.

So Frank clambered back aboard the air ship, and said:

"Forward, Barney. Keep a close watch of the country, for we must overtake and succor them if we can."

Pomp and Hardy brought out their rifles. The air ship sailed rapidly on over a rolling country.

There were thick jungles, alternating with groves of trees, and sometimes a level expanse of plain high-grown with bush.

Here the marsupial kangaroo with her young lurked. Here also the bush native was most at home.

On the air ship swept. The voyagers were all upon the alert, until suddenly they approached a low lying range of rocky hills.

Here, below what seemed to be a natural rampart or ledge of rock, were crouched a dozen rough-clad men. Their rifles were speaking sharply, and they were firing into a jungle near, but not a bush native was in sight.

There was something terror-inspiring in the position of these men, battling against a mysterious foe, who was always so mysteriously invisible, who could never be brought from cover or met upon any vantage ground.

Many a band of hardy explorers like this very band had been overtaken by the same fate.

Pursued by the dread foe, one by one they had been decimated until not one remained to tell the tale. Picked off silently, surely by the poisonous darts.

The air-ship bore down toward them. At sight of it a great commotion was created.

In a moment all were upon their feet. They gazed upon the apparition apparently dumfounded.

Down sank the air-ship and came to a stop but a few hundred feet above their heads.

"Hello!" shouted Hardy, "are you in trouble?"

"Great kangaroos!" cried one of the Australians. "Who in the mischief are you and what do you call that 'ere craft you're on?"

"This is the air-ship *Swallow!*" replied Hardy.

"An air-ship? Hang me fer a crocodile. But I never heerd tell of such a thing afore. Where are ye from?"

"From America!"

"Wall, I'm beat! I might have known ye were a passel of Yankees. Nobody else could have made up sech a rig to be sure. How do ye make that craft sail in the air?"

"Can't you see?" replied Hardy; "electricity is the motive power, but the three rotascopes cause the air ship to keep afloat."

The Australian nodded his head.

"Now I kin see," he cried; "thar must be a heap of power in them engines. But come down an' let us grip yer paw. How many of ye are there?"

"There are four of us."

"Only four? That's only a handful for this region. I tell ye, these ere bushmen are hard to fight."

"I agree with you there," replied Hardy; "but who are you, and what are you doing up in this region?"

It was some moments before the spokesman made reply.

"Wall, I'm Bill Rudolph of Brisbane, an' these are my friends. We're up in this ere kentry on very serious bizness."

"Looking for gold, eh?"

"No."

Frank Reade, Jr., now came out and stood beside Hardy. He shouted:

"Hold on! We're coming down to have a talk with you!"

"All right!" replied Rudolph. "We are glad to have ye. I allus had a likin' fer Yankees, being as I'm partly one myself, belonging in Canada when I'm at home."

Down settled the air-ship. In a few moments it rested upon the ground within a few yards of the party.

They came forward heartily, being types of the Australian adventurer and stock grower.

All were armed to the teeth, and wore a grim, determined expression.

Frank and Hardy introduced themselves and in turn were introduced to the Australians of whom Bill Rudolph seemed to be the leader.

"So ye've cum to Australia to look fer wild men?" cried Rudolph. "Wall, they're here. It's an easy job to look fer 'em but a mighty hard one to find 'em."

"So we expect!" replied Frank, "but we are curious to know what has brought you so far into the wilderness."

"Only a desperate need could have brought us here, friend," replied Rudolph. "We're on a very important errand, which is the rescue of a beautiful young girl."

"A rescue?"

"Yes."

"But—she is not in the hands of the bushmen?"

"No, if she was we would not take the trouble to come here, for she would not now likely be alive. Her name is Dorothy Fair and she is the daughter of the richest man in Brisbane, Roger Fair. A rascally wretch named Alden Thorpe proposed to her, was refused, then decoyed her from home and abducted her into this wilderness. They say he is in league with the bushmen and is called King of the Bush. If we git our paws onto him he will hang!"

"Good!" cried Frank and Hardy in chorus. "He will deserve it."

Before Rudolph could say another word a strange and awful tragedy occurred. It dumfounded all for a moment.

CHAPTER VI.

AMONG DEADLY FOES.

THERE was a sharp momentary swish in the atmosphere and then one of the men threw up his arms with a wild cry of anguish and fell.

A poisonous dart was imbedded in his bosom. A few thrills and death had clutched him.

Whether it was prescience or divination none could say. But Barney raised his rifle.

"Bad luck to the murtherin' devils!" he cried, and fired into a clump of tall grass not far away.

There came from the covert a smothered cry of anger and pain and out staggered a bush ranger. His half naked black form was contorted and twisted with agony.

He fell in a heap. Instantly a dozen shots were poured into the covert by the white men.

But evidently this fellow had been the sole occupant. Barney was about to run forward and take a look at his victim, but Rudolph gripped his arm.

"For God's sake, don't do that."

"Phwy not, sor?"

"You would be a dead man in two seconds. Be sure the mates of that black rascal are within easy range. We have traveled one hundred miles, pursued by these fellows, and this is the first one of them we have clapped eyes on."

"By the horn-spoon, it speaks well for the aim of that gentleman," cried one of the Australians.

"That's right!" cried Rudolph. "How did yer git yer eyes on him so quick, Irish?"

"Humph! I guessed at it, sor!" replied Barney, candidly. "It was only a chance shot!"

"Well, but we have been making chance shots for the last week, yet we ain't hit nuthin'."

"The bushmen have evidently located you," said Frank. "We came across one of your men in the bed of the river back here."

"Poor Smith," replied Rudolph. "We couldn't risk goin' back ter pick him up."

"In our country," said Hardy, "we would fight these bushmen as we do our Indians, take them at their own game."

"Humph!" exclaimed Rudolph. "You would find out spooty quick that that's a heap of diff'rence 'twixt bushmen and Injuns. These 'ere blacks can out-general anythin' top of ther earth. They kin live whar nuthin' else can. They'll eat lizards, snakes, toads, or anything that creeps or crawls. They're as silent as death, as quick as a shadder, an' ye can't run 'em down."

"How would it do for you to make a charge into the bush?" asked Frank.

"It would be suicide. The pizen varmints wouldn't be there when we got there, but they'd git a good chance at us. Oh, we know 'em well!"

"In that case," said Hardy, "how do any of you expect to return from here alive?"

"Their chances are agin us. But here we air, an' we've all sworn to rescue Dorothy Fair or die in the attempt. Eh, boys?"

The Australians gave a plucky cheer. This touched the aerial voyagers at once.

Frank exchanged glances with Hardy. Barney spat on his hands, and Pomp made up a hideous face.

"Gentlemen," said Frank, "we are interested in your project which is certainly a noble and manly one. But we can see that you are in a very precarious position. Now we are traveling in this region purely for love of wild adventures. If it is agreeable to you, ourselves and the air-ship stand ready to co-operate with you in effecting the rescue of Dorothy Fair."

Words can hardly express the effect of this upon the Australians. They burst into loud and hearty cheers.

Rudolph fairly embraced them.

"God bless ye!" he cried, "it's like Americans that is! This gives us a big lift an' I feel sure that we'll give Al Thorpe a hard chase!"

"You say he is in league with the blacks?" asked Frank.

"Lived amoung 'em most of his life. He's more'n half black hisself, and as good a bushman as any of 'em."

The words were hardly out of Rudolph's mouth when something whizzed by his head. It was a bushman's dart.

"Jerusha!" he gasped; "thet was close! We'd better get a bit lower!"

Barney and Pomp and Hardy fusilladed the bush all about with their Winchesters. This undoubtedly removed all immediate danger.

The guns used by the Australians were of an obsolete pattern—muzzle loaders—and not to be compared with the Winchesters.

And now a general consultation was held as to the best plan to pursue.

The air-ship could not accommodate the whole party. Therefore it was decided that none of the Australians should go aboard.

But the *Swallow* should hover over them and camp with them at night. Watch should be vigilantly kept of the bushmen.

In this way it was believed that the party could reach the open plains in safety. There, there would be less to fear from the blacks.

Rudolph's belief was that Thorpe had taken his fair captive to the Pinnacle Mountains, deep in the heart of Australia.

Here there were almost impenetrable fastnesses, where it would be easy for the wily villain to remain in hiding with little fear of discovery by any ordinary means.

The inaccessibility of the Pinnacle Mountains seemed to be his safeguard. But the air ship could overcome this, and the hopes of the rescuers were based upon this fact.

No time was lost in at once making the start.

First the air ship ascended and traversed a wide circle about, dropping dynamite bombs into the bush. The natives were not proof against this, and four of them were routed out and shot.

This was progress. The Australians were delighted.

It seemed as if Providence had placed within their hands the means for successfully combatting the deadly and hitherto invincible foe.

Satisfied that he had cleared the vicinity, Frank returned to the little eminence where the party was.

Then the start was made.

The air ship, upon approaching any jungle or bush, would drop bombs and dislodge the black foe; so that the Australians traveled in safety.

After a few days of this sort of traveling, not a bushman seemed to be within miles of them. It seemed as if they had given over the pursuit.

But Rudolph was skeptical.

"You kin bet it means suthin'," he said, "they never give up. They're likely hatchin' up some new scheme."

His words proved prophetic.

Gradually the party had worked their way into the interior. In fact they had come in view of the Pinnacle Mountains.

These from the distant view were seen to have been rightly named. A stranger aggregation of mountain peaks could hardly be imagined.

They formed a semi-circular chain, with a level plain leading up to their base. In this horseshoe like enclosure the air-ship descended, just as the shades of night fell.

It was purposed to encamp here and the next day to enter the hills. Rudolph and his men soon had found a spring and made a fire.

A young kangaroo was shot and meat furnished for the party. There was plenty of game in the bush about.

For several days now nothing had been seen of the bush natives, and the party felt quite secure. Fatal security!

This led unfortunately to a laxity of precaution. Usually the air-ship had extended a live wire about a radius of a quarter of a mile from camp, contact with which would sound an alarm aboard the Swallow.

But, encamped here, right under the Pinnacle Peaks, somewhat singularly this precaution was not taken. The coast seemed clear.

In the camp, two men served alternately as sentries. On board the air ship Barney watched the first half of the night and Pomp the latter.

The search-light sent a pathway of light against the mountain wall. The camp firelight was paled by it.

For some hours the Australians lay about the camp fire, smoking and conversing. Then one by one they turned in and went to sleep.

The sentry paced up and down before the camp. One hundred feet distant Barney sat upon the fore rail of the air ship watching the gloom.

The lookout seemed adequate and all seemed secure. No sign of the foe was seen.

But shortly after midnight, Barney fancied he heard the call of a lyre bird in a distant jungle. It was answered from another point.

Had the Celt been upon the American plains, he would have interpreted it as the signal of Indian foes. As it was, he was a little more on his guard.

After awhile the note of the lyre bird sounded again, and was answered from another quarter. The intonation did not sound natural.

"It is a signal, bejabers," muttered Barney, "on me worrud it is! The spalpeens are out there!"

Satisfied of this, the Celt was undecided what to do. His first impulse was to spread an alarm.

But upon second thought he refrained from this. It did not seem altogether necessary.

After all, the foe could not invade the camp without being seen. So Barney decided upon a different move.

He whistled to the camp sentry. The Australian was sitting upon a fallen log, with his gun upon his knee, and apparently gazing intently into the darkness of the bush.

To the Celt's surprise the sentry did not answer him nor did he move.

"Whight now, an' phwat's the matter wid his ears?" muttered the Celt. "Shure it must be deaf he is."

Again he whistled.

But though the note was louder it had no better effect than before. The fellow did not heed it.

The Celt was astounded.

"Shure it's ashlaphe he is!" he muttered, with slow conviction.

"Och, hone, an' that will never do!"

That the camp sentry should allow himself to fall asleep at his post was to Barney almost a crime. He was filled with indignation.

"On me worrud!" he reflected, "he ought to be hung up by the heels fer that. Shure has he no regard fer the loives av all the rest in the camp!"

Then in the distant depths of the bush the Celt once more heard a shrill note, the same peculiar note of the lyre bird.

It was the same deadly signal, the same warning of the proximity of great peril.

One moment the Celt reflected upon the proper move for him to make. With the camp sentry asleep, there seemed nothing to prevent the deadly bushmen from entering the camp and slaughtering all of its inmates.

Barney hesitated no longer.

With an angry impulse he leaped over the rail. He would arouse the stupid guard and teach him a severe lesson for his negligence.

Filled with these angry thoughts, Barney crossed the intervening space to the spot where the guard sat.

"Shure, it's a foine mon yez are!" he shouted angrily, "an' I a-whistlin' fer yez fer the lasht tin minutes, an' devil an answer. Ashlape at yer post, eh? Shure it's a batin' yez deserve!"

Barney placed a rough hand on the man's shoulder and shook him vigorously. As he did so he was confronted with an appalling discovery which fairly froze the blood in his veins.

CHAPTER VII.

A TERRIBLE FIGHT.

BENEATH Barney's grip the sentry tilted limply forward, and as the Celt relaxed his hold, he slipped off the log and lay with breast and face exposed to the firelight.

For a moment the Celt's brain fairly reeled.

"Mither alive preserve us!" he gasped.

Those distorted features, cold staring eyes and the fallen jaw, were proofs of an awful fact. The sentry was a corpse.

"Dead!" rejoined the Celt.

Then he leaned forward an instant. There was a dash of blood upon the man's gray shirt. There imbedded in the breast was one of the terrible poisoned darts.

It had penetrated the heart and death had been of course instantaneous.

The dart had been fired from the darkness of the bush. The fell stroke had come so sudden that the poor wretch had not even had time for an outcry.

Barney did not waste but a few moments of precious time in that spot. He knew full well the awful importance of prompt action.

At the same moment there had come to him the grawsome thought that he was also exposed to the deadly darts. At any moment he might experience the sensation of one of them in his own body.

But the Celt never lost his presence of mind. Very coolly he stepped back and then with a lightning spring was in the center of the camp and among the slumbering forms.

With a quick movement he kicked away the burning embers of the fire, and then shouted:

"Up, up, all av yez! Shure we're betrayed an' the foe is upon us!"

At that instant something struck the crown of his hat. He heard the hissing of objects in the air about.

Barney knew that these were poisoned darts. Self preservation is the first law of nature. He threw himself flat upon the ground and began to wriggle toward the air-ship.

Dark forms had come hurtling out of the bush. The terrible darts were flying everywhere.

"Kape down all av yez!" cried Barney, "don't get up on yer feet or yez will be hit."

But the Australians, wakened from a sound sleep in such a thrilling manner, naturally were too confused to understand anything, and their first impulse was to get upon their feet.

Fatal move!

The deadly darts struck them down like sheep. Fire was opened with their defective muzzle loaders, but in the darkness it could be only a random fire.

While the fiendish bushmen were well protected by the bush and the gloom, and were from an invisible point burling death among them.

Barney crawled snake-like rapidly toward the air-ship. To him it seemed a miracle that the bushmen were not already boarding her.

Of course, the uproar aroused all on board the Swallow. They came tumbling out on deck.

Con Hardy ran plump into Frank at the pilot-house door.

"For Heaven's sake," gasped the young aeronaut, "what is the matter, Frank? Are we attacked?"

"Not yet. It must be in the camp," replied Frank. "Where is Barney?"

The Celt did not answer to the call. Meanwhile the flashes of the guns were seen in the gloom, and the cries of the combatants was evidence enough of the desperate battle going on.

Frank concluded that Barney had left the air ship to join in the fray. While he could not commend this move as a wise one, he realized that the Australians were desperately in need of help.

Hardy and Pomp had their Winchesters, but they did not dare fire, for in the gloom friend could not be told from foe.

Frank, however, sprang to the search-light. He turned it on full force, and the exact state of affairs was seen.

Two men were climbing over the rail of the air ship.

Where the camp had been was a motley crew of half naked, ghoulish forms. These were stripping the belongings from the dozen dead men lying about the camp circle.

The awful truth was patent in that one glance.

The entire camp was wiped out. Swift and silent and deadly had been the work of the bushmen.

Petrified with horror, those on the deck of the air-ship were for a moment dazed and unable to act.

Over the rail came two men—the only survivors.

"Begorra, Misher Frank," cried the first in a rich brogue, "I did the best I cud, sor, to save him. But the murtherin' hounds had kilt the sentry, sor, an' got to close quarters."

"Why did you leave the air-ship without arousing us?" cried Frank sternly.

The Celt hastily told his story. Then it was seen how he had been so easily deceived.

But behind him was the sole survivor of the Australians. Pale and horror-struck, Bill Rudolph had barely escaped with his life.

He was a brave man and would gladly have fought to the death, had there been anything like an even chance.

But it would have been madness to have courted the deadly darts from the wound of which there was no recovery.

So miraculously he had fallen in with Barney and they had crept to the air-ship and aboard. Their lives were spared.

"You did right," cried Frank; "this is an awful affair. But it is for us to win revenge. Let us wipe the miserable gang of black murderers off the face of the earth!"

"Whurroo!" cried Barney. "I'm wid yez, Misher Frank!"

"I only wish it was possible," groaned Rudolph; "but I'm afraid they'll get all of us before we can get out of this condemned country."

"Not much!" cried Hardy. "We will look out for that."

But no better mark could be desired than the murdering gang of black demons now engaged in stripping the dead men.

They were revealed in the deadly glare of the search light. For the moment they seemed to have forgotten their traditional shrewdness and caution and remained exposed.

Every one of the air ship's party had procured Winchesters.

They opened with a terrific volley right into the midst of the gang.

It was a deadly fire, and the blacks fell like nine-pins, until with a shadow-like celerity they dispersed into the bush.

"Don't spare one of them!" shouted Frank; "keep up the fire!"

At the same moment the young inventor sprung into the pilot house, and raised the air ship a few feet from the ground.

Then, with the search light sweeping in every direction, a veritable fiery detective, the bushmen were pursued.

But they had vanished like mist before the sun.

With the remarkable faculty possessed by them of making themselves invisible, they had disappeared. Not one could be ferreted out.

But a hot fire was kept up in the thickest of the bush. Every part of it was riddled with shot.

For an area of a mile this was kept up remorselessly, until daylight came.

It was reasonably certain now that the bushmen had been driven from the immediate vicinity.

"That will be a good lesson for them," cried Con Hardy; "we must have killed a score of them. I have some curiosity to look at one of the wretches."

"Humph!" exclaimed Rudolph; "do you reckon you'll have the chance?"

"Why not?" asked Hardy; "there must be a dozen or more lying dead in the camp."

"I doubt it."

"How so?"

"Wait and see," said Rudolph, positively. "The bushmen seldom leave their dead upon the field."

"But they have had no chance to take these away."

Hardy was positive that the bushmen could not have removed their dead from the camp.

The early morning light was breaking when the air-ship descended upon the camp. It rested upon the ground, and then the voyagers sprang over the rail.

The sight spread before their gaze was a fearful one.

There lay the dead forms of the Australians nearly stripped of their clothing and effects. They were shockingly mutilated.

It was a sorrowful sight.

Tenderly they were straightened and prepared for burial. Graves were dug in the wilderness sand, and they were buried.

A slab of stone was procured, and with a hammer and chisel Frank cut in the names of the victims and the date of the massacre.

"That stone won't stay here," declared Rudolph. "Those black scoundrels will carry it off!"

"Do you believe it?" asked Frank, with horror.

"It's likely, an' they will probably drag every man from his grave like their ghouls they are.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE PINNACLE HILLS.

THIS announcement caused a thrill of horror to run through the party.

"They ought to be exterminated!" cried Hardy.

"That's true enough," agreed Rudolph. "They an' the rabbits are the curse of Australia. But ye might as well try to stop a pestilence with cold water."

Rudolph's prediction in regard to the bodies of the bushmen had proved true enough.

Not one was to be found.

Hardy was not only disappointed but mystified.

"I don't understand that," he said; "however could they get them out of the way so quickly?"

"That's the conundrum," declared Rudolph. "Nobody was ever yet smart enough to tell. I tell yew they are queer cattle these wild men of the bush!"

"Ugh!" said Hardy. "I begin to fear them."

"You would fear them indeed if you knew 'em as well as I do."

However, the affair was ended. The sad funeral was over, and the voyagers were now confronted with the exigencies of an uncertain future.

"To rescue that Dorothy Fair!" cried Rudolph; "that's all I keer about now. If we kin only run down Thorpe an' rid the kentry of a renegade an' the worst scoundrel in Australia, that's what will satisfy me!"

"Well," said Frank, "we'll try it, friend Rudolph; but it begins to look like a big undertaking."

"Wall, you bet!"

"I suppose we are to look for him in these hills?"

"Yas."

"It's the most likely place."

"Sartin!"

"Humph! There are more caverns and secret nooks here than one could ferret out in lifetime. It begins to look to me like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Frank Reade, Jr., however, was a man of resource and expedient. He was not to be defeated.

In fact he reveled in the solution of just such problems as the present. First of all he decided upon a system.

Somewhere in these Pinnacle Hills in the heart of Australia Alden Thorpe, the renegade bushman, had a retreat. And in that retreat he held as captive the fair daughter of Roger Fair.

The young girl in such villainous hands might ere this be beyond their aid. But Rudolph said with conviction:

"He will do her no injury be sure. His game will be ter force her to come to his terms an' marry him of her own free consent."

It was decided to begin the search at once. The air-ship sailed over the range of hills and now it was easily seen how enormous the task before them was.

The hills were of great extent and in places almost inaccessible. It would be hard to find a wilder, more outlandish spot on the face of this terrestrial foot-stool.

So far as could be seen no human being found abode in the hills. For three days the air ship reconnoitered the territory.

Really nothing else could be done. Or at least this was necessary as a first or preliminary move.

In this time Frank had drawn extensive and accurate maps of the entire range.

And now he applied the principle of logic to his scheme. He marked all of the available passes in and out of the hills.

These passes he reckoned as the only likely ground to be passed over by the villain in entering or leaving his den. He must employ some one of these passes.

Which one, was yet to be determined! How to do this would have puzzled an ordinary man.

Hardy suggested watching each in turn. But this was not feasible, as while the air ship watched one pass, the villain could simply use another.

Frank's plan was original and most effective.

He brought from his cabin down a heavy chest. This he opened and took out a great mass of steel netting. As this was disentangled it assumed the shape of coats and trousers and head coverings, all of finely woven steel.

"Jeminal!" ejaculated Hardy, "coats of mail! Yes, whole suits of it!"

"Just so!" replied Frank, "and impervious to any rifle ball or the darts of the foe. There are six suits here. Let every man put one on for to-night. They are light and will not distress one."

The effect of this upon the party was thrilling. Rudolph danced for very joy.

"Kangaroos and hares!" he cried. "We'll whip the foe easy in these rigs. Ah, if my brave boys only had had such a thing."

Frank put the sixth suit back in the chest. The voyagers each donned a suit of the mail.

Then Frank explained his purpose.

"I am going to put out every light aboard the air-ship," he said; "to-night is moonless and will be dark as Erebus. First we will descend into the pass under us. Here I will stretch a wire across it two feet from the ground. It will be only a hair wire which will break at the slightest pressure. But it will spring an alarm bell on board the air ship when it breaks. Whoever passes through the defile will break it without knowing it."

"Now, in every pass on this side of the range, I am going to put one of these wires. They will be numbered and will connect with alarm bells on board the Swallow, which will be a few hundred feet up in the air. In that way we shall locate the pass used by the villains in entering and leaving their retreat. It will be the first step toward learning the location of their den."

"Clever," cried Hardy. "Oh, Frank, you are a wonder!"

"I never cud hav thought up such a scheme in a hundred years," declared Rudolph. "It'll work!"

"Then," said Frank, "as there might be danger of our being exposed to the poisonous darts while laying the wire, our mail suits will come into good play. We can baffle them."

The voyagers could hardly wait for nightfall to come.

But finally the day waned, and the darkness of Egypt settled down over the land. Frank turned off all the lights.

The party was all equipped, and silently the air ship sank down into the first pass. The wire was placed and the connection with a small battery made. Then wire was paid out from the spool as the air ship rose.

In this way four of the passes were fixed. The air ship rose to a height of several hundred feet, and the lights were turned on.

For two hours the voyagers sat watching the signal bells. Midnight passed, and it began to look as if no one would pass in or out of the pass that night.

There was of course a possibility of the signals being sounded by some other cause. A wild animal might come in contact with the wire, or it might relax of its own volition. But nothing venture nothing gain.

Suddenly one of the bells tinkled. Every man was upon his feet.

"Pass number three!" cried Hardy. "That is the way to the den, Frank."

The young inventor's eyes glistened.

"We'll see," he said, stoically.

The hours passed until daylight came again. None of the other signals were sprung.

Pass Number Three was undoubtedly the entrance to the hidden den of the King of the Bush. So much was gained. But there was more to do.

Frank's active brain soon devised another expedient.

"We must track the rascals to their hiding-place," he said. "Barney and Mr. Rudolph, I will ask your co-operation. Pomp and Mr. Hardy can guard the air-ship while we are away!"

"What?" cried Rudolph. "Air we going to try it on our own hook, cap'en?"

"I will explain my plan later," said Frank. "We will have to wait for darkness."

"Begorra I'm ready fer anything," cried Barney, "divil the odds so long as yez lead the way, Misther Frank!"

"I will agree to do that," said Frank.

The air-ship hovered over the hills all that day.

Constant watch was kept for some sign of the wily bushmen. But of course nothing was seen.

There could be no question but that Thorpe and his shadow gang were aware of the air ship's presence and its purpose. What their sensations were could only be imagined.

They kept assiduously out of sight, however. But Rudolph said:

"Hump! they're acomin' and going all ther time, but they know how ter do it without bein' seen. They're watchin' us night an' day."

Slowly the day wore on.

The aerial voyagers were glad, indeed, when night settled down again. Thrilling adventures were before them.

As soon as darkness had fairly settled down, Frank made his preparations. He mixed a can of a curious chemical which he explained as being somewhat like phosphorus.

"By means of this," he said, "I hope to track the bushmen to their den. We may succeed and we may fail. We must wear our suits of mail and go well armed. We may get into a desperate fight. If we do, then Pomp and Hardy must come to our assistance. I will give a whistle like this." Frank gave the signal. "Upon hearing it you must throw the search light into the defile and come down to help us."

"A'right, Marse Frank," cried Pomp. "I jes' do dat, sah."

"I wish I was going with you fellows," said Hardy lugubriously.

"Well," said Frank, "there must be two men aboard the air ship. I want Barney, and as Mr. Rudolph is an Australian and knows the country, I thought he would be the next best man."

"Oh, that is all right," agreed Hardy. "I am willing to stay where I can do the most good."

So the matter was settled.

The party landed at a little past the midnight hour. The air ship, with all lights doused, sank lightly down, and the three adventurers left her deck.

Then the Swallow sprung into the air again and left them upon terra firma, and in the dark depths of the Pinnacle Hills and amid unknown dangers. What would the next few hours bring forth?

CHAPTER IX.

SOME CLEVER TRAILING.

AFTER silently listening to make sure there was no foe near, the trio set out silently up the pass.

Frank led the way with his pail of chemical. When they had arrived at the narrowest part of the pass, and where the wire had previously been placed, he paused.

Here the floor of the pass was of smooth rock from wall to wall. The passage of water over it at some time had rendered it smooth.

Here Frank proceeded to apply the chemical to the rock with a brush. He covered the entire width with a coating several feet wide, the adventurers taking care to be upon the upper side so as not to have to cross it.

Then Frank stowed the pail in a crevice in the cliff, and the three men crouched down against the wall to wait and watch.

An hour passed.

Then a slight rustling sound was heard. It was only momentary, and there was a sensation of somebody passing.

That was all.

Nothing was seen.

Silently the trio waited. All was stillness in the pass. Barney and Rudolph were wondering what Frank was going to do.

But the young inventor knew his business well. He waited what he deemed was the requisite length of time.

Then he drew a small electric globe from his pocket. It was connected with a small battery.

It gave a tiny light, which thrown downward could not be seen in any other direction. With this he advanced to the center of the pass.

Then he scrutinized the stone floor a few moments. Up the pass for a hundred feet they went.

Then he produced from his pocket what looked like a small compass with a needle which was unprotected by any cover of glass.

Frank adjusted this needle, and then taking a small vial from his pocket he applied a few drops of liquid to the point of the needle.

It quivered a few moments, swung about and pointed up the pass.

"I thought so," whispered Frank. "This material which is on the needle has an affinity of a powerful magnetic character for the chemical. Now that bush native has walked through the chemical and will leave a trail of it for a mile at least. By following this needle's course we will track him."

This was very wonderful. Surely Frank Reade, Jr., was a wonderful inventor.

Nothing was said, however, and up the defile the three trailers crept.

It was slow work.

Frank was obliged to keep his eye constantly on the needle, by means of the little inverted electric light which could be seen nowhere else.

Barney and Rudolph were obliged to keep their eyes and ears open, being constantly on the alert. And thus the trio went on.

It seemed ages to them ere they reached the end of the pass.

Upon one side rose the sheer wall of the mountain for a thousand

feet. On the other side was a shelving descent into glades and hollows far below.

The needle pointed directly to the mountain wall, and here, almost invisible in the face of the cliff, a path was found. Two could not walk abreast upon it.

Below fully a thousand feet was a terrible rocky hole. Along this path they must proceed.

There was no hesitation.

Frank led the way watching the needle. It was a difficult and riskyfeat.

At any moment a slight misstep might send one of them hurtling into the depths.

Slowly along the path they made their way. They had proceeded thus what seemed an interminable distance, when a cold chill fell upon all.

An unmistakable sound came to their hearing; some one was coming along the path.

One of the bushmen undoubtedly on his way to the den. What was to be done? For a moment all were nigh frozen with horror.

To be exposed at this moment, just when victory seemed right within their grasp, would be hard indeed. Yet what could be done?

The bush native was in their rear. Rudolph, the big Australian, was the last of the trio.

Not a word was spoken. The three men crouched against the mountain wall.

It was impossible for the bushranger to pass them without discovering them. He must surely come in touch with them.

A single cry, a warning note, and the game would be up.

Frank and Barney drew their knives. But Rudolph, the giant Australian, had set his powerful frame against the mountain wall and waited.

He knew the average height of the bush native was but little over five feet. He judged this height by his own stature, and thrust one powerful arm straight out before him, with the fingers spread.

Along the wall came the native. He could see nothing, but this was nothing to him. The sense of feeling was quite enough.

On he came, unsuspecting the trap laid for him.

Suddenly—by the merest chance, Rudolph had guessed the right height—something met his throat. Instantly talon finger clutched his windpipe. There was one attempt at a cry.

But it was only a gurgle. The next moment the bush native was drawn into a powerful embrace. There was just the faintest semblance of a struggle.

Then the terrible weakness overpowered the strangling wretch. He hung limply in the giant's clutch. Far out over the verge Rudolph hurled the senseless body.

There was a distant faint crunching sound, and all was over. They were saved.

"All right, lads," whispered the Australian.

Again along the cliff path they made their way. It was rapidly widening now.

Very soon it came out upon a rocky shelf. A great pinnacle peak arose above them.

Here for a moment the needle failed, but quickly picked up the scent again, and they moved forward.

Every nerve was upon the alert now, for they felt sure that they were nearing the den of the bushmen.

Across the shelf of rock the trail led and to a crevice in the mountain wall. Through this narrow place they squeezed for a dozen yards and came into a curious pocket with walls on all sides, high and not to be scaled.

In one corner of this pocket was a cavernous opening. Into this they crept.

And here they were nearly discovered. A dark form brushed by them. But the bushman was not aware of their presence.

On they crept along this cavern. Once more they emerged into open air. This time they were in a larger pocket.

Steps cut in the stone led up one side of this and into the mouth of a cavern.

This trended downward for some hundred yards, and then the rush and roar of a cataract was heard.

"A mountain stream!" whispered Frank. "I wonder if it is in the cavern?"

"From the sound I should say yes," replied Rudolph. "I reckon we're gittin' near home!"

The Australian was right.

Turning an angle in the cavern the trio of the adventurers came upon an astonishing sight.

A great high arched cavern chamber was before them.

It was lit up with huge fires which sent great volumes of black pitchy smoke up against the blackened roof.

The firelight played upon a sheet of falling water at the far end of the cavern. This fell into a subterranean channel and vanished in the heart of the mountain.

Perhaps three hundred blacks were congregated in this cavern chamber. They were engaged in various occupations.

Two or three of them were engaged in roasting a young kangaroo. Others were eating, some were sleeping and some wrestling.

These were the bushmen, dreaded denizens of the Australian wilds in their homes. Surely it was a barbarous spectacle.

Discovery now meant annihilation. What could three men, though they were mail-clad, hope to do against three hundred? The odds were too great.

Therefore there was need of extreme care. They were upon the alert.

"I want ter git my eyes onto the king of this tribe," whispered Rudolph; "he's ther man I want to see."

"Perhaps there are other parts of the cavern," said Frank; "he may be there. I don't see any white man among them."

"Bless ye he's nigh as black! But he's a way of dressin' different of course."

"Begorra there's a loight through an openin' beyant," said Barney, "mebbe it's another cavern, sor."

"You are right," said Frank, with some excitement, "let us get a look at it."

This was a problem however.

How were they to cross the big cavern? However, Frank led the way along the wall in the shadows.

Being dark forms and unsuspecting the presence of a foe, if they were seen by any of the blacks no attention was paid to them.

They passed safely around and into the shadows beyond. It was a most daring move.

Elated with their success they were a trifle emboldened. They saw a cavern chamber beyond.

And what they beheld astonished them. This chamber was hung with silk curtains and carpeted with rugs, and contained comfortable furniture as well as being lit with oil lamps.

There was a well stocked book-case, a table strewn with papers, and at this table sat a powerful framed man.

He was dressed much like an Australian of the better class, with white trousers and broad hat, and velvet coat. His face was dark and evil.

That he was the notorious "King of the Bush," Alden Thorpe, the renegade half breed ruler of the wild men, there was no doubt.

Our adventurers gazed upon him with deep interest.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

PARTICULARLY was Rudolph impressed. He clenched his hands fiercely and said:

"That is the man whom I wish to settle accounts with. He is the worst vilyun on this earth."

But from his personnel the party glanced to that of two other occupants of the chamber.

They were both females.

One was a black woman, dressed in half-civilized fashion. The other was a vision of rare loveliness.

Dorothy Fair was a beauty of the rarest type. But her lovely features were drawn with suffering, and her face pale, though proud and resolute in its expression.

The black woman's hand was upon her shoulder, and it was plain that she was her keeper.

The young captive's lips moved, and she spoke:

"No, Alden Thorpe, my spirit is not broken. Nor can you ever break it. I defy you, and adjure you in the name of Heaven to take me back to my friends. I do not love you, and I will never marry you!"

A malignant frown rested upon the brow of the King of the Bush.

"That is proudly spoken," he said; "but it is naught. If I have to keep you here forever I will win you. You shall be mine and acknowledge love for me—I have sworn it."

Rudolph uttered a half audible ejaculation, and would have taken a step forward.

But Frank clutched his arm.

"Is this all you have to say to me?" asked the defiant young girl.

"Quite all, unless you have concluded to be reasonable," replied the bush chief suavely.

"Then take me back to my prison chamber," said Dorothy resolutely; "but before I go, let me tell you that strong and just men are on your track, and they will hunt you down and you will pay for this with your life!"

The bush chief laughed derisively.

"You are mad!" he cried, "they might search a thousand years and they would never find you. Again, no living man could ever reach this place, for my men, the most silent, invisible and deadliest foes in the world, would annihilate them before ever they got near these hills."

Our adventurers could not help a smile at this.

"So you see," continued the villain, mockingly, "how utterly hopeless your case is. You are mine virtually; you might as well yield and be mine willingly. I beg of you, Dorothy; I swear to make you happy!"

He arose and advanced toward her.

But she repelled him like a tigress; her eyes flashed fire.

"Do not come near me," she gritted.

The villain paused with a deprecatory wave of his hand.

"Not yet!" he said, "you will come to it by and by. Take her back, Reta, and bring her here again in the morning. Adieu, my charmer!"

The black woman led the fair captive away. Then Thorpe turned to his table and his papers.

It was a strange scene.

And as our adventurers gazed upon this strange man, with his stamp of civilization, the ruler of the wildest class of beings on earth,

they could not help but reflect upon the fact that he was no ordinary being.

To look upon such a scene, deep in the heart of wild Australia, was a strange, anomalous thing.

But something must be done.

They were there for the purpose of rescuing Dorothy Fair. They had accomplished much.

They had ferreted out her hiding place, and had penetrated into the very den of her captor.

But here they were confronted with the greatest obstacles of all. How were they to effect her liberation and transport her from the place without discovery?

It was a problem.

They drew deeper into the shadows, and held a faintly whispered conversation. Rudolph proposed a daring move.

"I reckon if we could get the pincers onto the old wolf we could bring him to terms," he declared. "S'posin' I creep up thar behind him and get a grip on his windpipe? One of ye can stick a gag in his mouth, an' then we'll tie him up an' drag him into one of these dark passages. I'll dress up in his clothes, imitate his voice, walk in an' let the girl out. Then we can work the rest the best way we can."

Frank and Barney gazed with astonishment at the wan, who could make so daring a proposition.

Yet they could see that if it was successful the game would be won. It was a daring coup, but in lieu of a better scheme why not try it?

"That will be a risky game," whispered Frank.

"Wall, not if I kin git my hands on his windpipe afore he kin holder," declared Rudolph.

"Enough," said Frank; "we must risk something to win, but if you are seen—"

"Only another risk," declared the Australian, coolly. "Now, I'll tell ye what to do. Stay right here, and I'll go around back of the varmint. If I get into trouble you must help me."

"Of course!"

"But I think I can play a lone hand. Watch fer signs."

The daring Australian glided away in the shadows. Around the cavern wall he went until he was in the rear of the villain, who was engrossed in his papers.

Silently and swiftly the gaunt figure glided down upon the King of the Bush.

In a moment he was but a yard behind him.

Then something crunched under his foot. Thorpe wheeled like a flash, but too late.

The strangler's powerful fingers were at his windpipe. His gleaming eyes, his wild face, were pressed close into the bushranger's.

"Not a word, ye dog, or ye die!" he hissed. "Ye're mine; mine, Alden Thorpe, curse ye!"

Of course the bushranger could not answer. The deadly fingers were crushing light and reason out of his carcass.

His tongue protruded, his eyes bulged hideously, and he relaxed limply into the Australian's powerful arms.

Fortunately none of the bushmen in the other cavern saw this.

Picking the villain up like a puppet Rudolph dragged him into the shadows where were Barney and Frank.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young inventor, "you did that well, Rudolph!"

The Australian reluctantly relaxed his grip on the villain's windpipe.

"I ought to kill the vermin," he gritted, "but I've another use for him. He's coming to. Put a gag in his mouth."

Barney hastily gagged him, and then his clothing was removed, after which he was bound hand and foot.

Lying helpless thus on his back in the side cavern, the villain was left for a moment.

Quickly Rudolph donned the velvet coat, the trousers and the broad hat of the captive. He did not look unlike the King of the Bush.

He pulled the hat rim down to conceal his features. Then he said:

"Now I'm goin' into the other cavern arter the gal. Don't leave here unless I call. Leave it all to me!"

"Good luck to ye!" cried Barney. "I admire yer pluck!"

Rudolph glided away, and a moment later with perfect sang froid he crossed the cavern and vanished into the inner cavern.

As he entered this inner cavern, the Australian encountered his first risk. He met the black woman who was Dorothy's keeper face to face.

The rim of his hat was well pulled down and Rudolph trusted to the shadows to conceal his features.

He imitated Thorpe's voice to perfection, as he said:

"I'm going in to see the gal, Reta. If you've got any place you'd like to go, now is yer chance."

The black woman only gave the speaker a superficial glance. She might have thought her master a trifle odd in his manner, but never once dreamed that it was not him.

"All right, master," she said in good English; "when shall I return?"

"Say an hour," replied Rudolph, carelessly, "in the meanwhile I am not ter be disturbed."

The black woman bowed and went out from the inner cavern. She was evidently glad of the respite.

Rudolph was elated, but cool as an icicle. He went on slowly and passed into a small cavern chamber which contained chairs and a couch.

Up from this sprung the fair captive, Dorothy Fair.

Her manner was fierce and tigress like. She recognized in her visitor only her captor.

"What does this intrusion mean?" she cried angrily. "Villain! what do you want here?"

For a moment Rudolph chuckled. Then he looked sharply about him.

"Is there anybody around here?" he asked apprehensively.

"What do you mean?"

The Australian laughed lightly, then removed his broad hat. In an instant the young girl uttered a sharp, joyous cry:

"Bill Rudolph! You here?"

"Then you know me?" asked the Australian with a chuckle. "Easy, Dorothy, for we are surrounded with great dangers."

"Oh, you have come to rescue me," breathed the overjoyed girl.

"Heaven be praised! you brave good man!"

Rudolph choked a little but said:

"Yes, we're goin' to try an' git ye out of this scrape. I have two companions in that outer cavern."

Then Rudolph told his story. Dorothy listened eagerly.

"Now?" asked the Australian, "do you know of any other means of exit from this cavern?"

"How did you come in?" she asked.

Rudolph described the entrance.

"I did not enter that way," she said. "I was brought here in a boat which came right into the cavern. It was a small river, I think."

"The steamer below the cataract," exclaimed Rudolph, "it must be a subterranean river. By the horn spoon, we'll get out of this ere scrape yet. Jest leave it to me."

The Australian was delighted.

CHAPTER XI.

DARING DEEDS.

RUDOLPH decided upon a bold move. He turned to the young girl, and said:

"You will follow me and not be afraid, Sis!"

"I will!" she replied, bravely.

"There may be some fightin'. If there is don't be skeered. You'll git out of it all right."

"I will promise you!" she said, bravely.

Rudolph took her by the hand and boldly led the way into the outer cavern. He skirted its wall until he reached the side cavern where he had left Barney and Frank with their captive.

Here explanations were made.

Rudolph announced his daring plan.

"Thar's a boat under thet cataract," he said, "but in order to git it you've got ter cross thier hull cavern whar thier blacks are. I think I could do it an' they'd take me for Thorpe. I could take the girl with me an' get clean away before they'd suspect anything."

"A good move," said Frank.

"But what will become of you fellers?"

"We will find our way out the way we came in," said Frank.

"Do ye think ye can?"

"We will try. If not, we will fight our way out."

"Be jabetes, that we will!"

Rudolph shook his head.

"Too great odds," he said; "I would not try that. Anyhow I'll put the gal into the boat. Can you manage a boat, sis?"

"Yes," replied Dorothy bravely. "I'll find my way down the underground river alone."

"But after she gets out——" began Frank.

"We must be thar to meet her," said Rudolph grimly.

So the plan was decided upon.

The villain Thorpe was left helpless upon the cavern floor. Rudolph thought he ought to be killed, but did not care to redder his hands.

"Ther devil will get him some time," he muttered. "An' then he'll find his reckoning!"

So Frank and Barney proceeded to make their way back in the shadows to the passage by which they had entered.

As for Rudolph, he took Dorothy's arm and marched boldly out into the main cavern.

He attracted the attention of the blacks. They glanced at him, but he saw that their mien was respectful. It was plain that they regarded him as their king.

What his purpose was with the girl captive was nothing to them. Straight to the foot of the cataract Rudolph went.

True enough, here on the sands was a long dugout boat.

Rudolph paused a moment.

"If I thought those chaps would not need help," he said, "I'd go with you, sis."

"Do not!" protested the young girl. "I can manage the boat alone. When I come out into the open country I will hide in the bush until you come to find me!"

"Brave gal," muttered Rudolph. "Git into the boat. Now, have ye got the paddle?"

"Yes."

"God bless ye an' good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

Out into the current shot the boat. The next moment it vanished with its fair occupant into the cavernous mouth beyond.

Rudolph breathed a mental prayer for a successful trip. Then he turned with the thought of aiding Frank and Barney.

He walked coolly along to the mouth of the cavern, where the en-

trance was made from the cliff. He could easily have walked out to freedom and safety.

But at that moment a thrilling thing occurred.

A snarling animal-like cry went through the cavern.

Then two human figures were seen grappling in the shadows. A quick rifle shot followed.

"Discovered!" gasped Rudolph. "Heaven help 'em now!"

Every bushman was rushing to the spot. Barney and Frank made a desperate effort to reach the cavern exit.

Darts flew all about them. Only the steel mail saved their lives.

They kept their Winchesters at work with deadly effect. The bushmen fell right and left.

But two against three hundred was terrible odds.

Their fate would have been quickly sealed had it not been for Rudolph. The plucky Australian had resolved upon a daring move.

He rushed into the circle of firelight and shouted fiercely:

"Back, every mother's son of ye! Let them go!"

Astounded the blacks paused. They saw an angry towering figure which they believed to be that of their chief.

It was Frank's and Barney's chance. They saw at once the shrewd game of Rudolph.

A moment more and they were in the outer cavern passage fleeing for their lives. The start thus obtained was their salvation.

But Rudolph saw that he must follow up his advantage quickly or he would be betrayed. A close acquaintance with the blacks would certainly result in this.

So he carried out his desperate *coup* with admirable nerve and *sang froid*. He made a sweeping motion to the blacks, and they fell back.

Then he turned and strode into the gloom of the cavern passage after Frank and Barney.

The blacks were puzzled beyond measure, and for a time made no action. But suddenly a cry came from the inner cavern.

Thorpe had succeeded in ejecting his gag, and now shouted lustily for help. It quickly came.

Then the daring game was quickly explained. The pursuit was quick and angry.

But the three rescuers had already reached the path along the mountain wall. Here Frank saw a dark object hovering in the sky above.

Instantly he put his whistle to his lips and blew a note. It was immediately answered from above.

"The air-ship!" cried Rudolph. "We are saved!"

"That is true," cried Frank, "but it is all owing to your daring work!"

"Not all," said Rudolph, modestly.

Down came the air-ship close to the mountain wall. The search-light showed the three adventurers clinging to the narrow path.

But at that very moment the blacks came out upon the rocky shelf in pursuit. They were headed by Thorpe, insane with fury.

Darts were hurtling about our adventurers. But again the impervious suits of mail saved them.

Hardy threw down the gang ladder and they scrambled aboard.

"Now," cried Frank, "let's give them a dose."

He rushed into the cabin and came out with some dynamite bombs. The air ship sailed over the shelf of rock swarming with the blacks, and the bombs were thrown down into their midst.

The effect was thrilling.

Dozens of the wretches were slain. The others were glad enough to retreat into the cavern.

For the nonce our adventures had the best of the situation.

But now the common thought was of Dorothy Fair.

What was her fate?

Had the brave young girl really succeeded in making the passage of the subterranean river in her dugout? This must be ascertained.

"Let me see," said Rudolph. "As near as I can make out that river emerges upon the bush plain four miles eastward. We must go thither at once."

"Will she have emerged as yet?" asked Frank.

"Oh, no!" replied Rudolph, "it would take her a long while to drift four miles on that sluggish current. She may not get out before daylight. Besides it is certain that the bushmen will pursue her."

"Then there is urgent need of our being at the river's exit."

"Certainly."

Frank lifted the air-ship over the mountain wall, and it sailed down the other slope of the Pinnacle Range and finally hung over the plain beyond.

It did not take long to locate the river.

The search-light did this. The air-ship descended upon the spot where it emerged from a dark cavern.

Close watch was kept of the current. The search-light illuminated the cavern roof.

An hour passed.

The gray light of dawn had begun to appear in the east. Then Rudolph began to wax nervous.

He consulted his watch.

"She ought to drift faster than a mile an hour," he said, "and she would paddle some, too. It is time for her to appear."

Frank looked up.

"Unless——"

"What?"

"Thorpe has overtaken her."

Rudolph muttered an imprecation.

"In that case!" he said, "all our work would be for naught. We

would have it all to do over again, and we might not have as good success next time."

"That is true," agreed Frank; "but we will hope for the best."

The sun presently rose, and the electric lights were doused. The air ship's occupants were getting nervous.

"I wish I had some sort of a craft," said Rudolph. "I'd venture a trip up there."

"We have a small rubber canoe aboard," said Frank.

"Have you?" cried the Australian eagerly; "that will be all right."

"Bring it out, Barney," said Frank.

The Celt hastened to obey.

"You see" said Rudolph, "it is not impossible that she may have run aground or lodged upon a rock somewhere. There is need of quick work."

The portable canoe was brought. The air compartments were filled, and it floated buoyantly upon the river.

Rudolph got into it and paddled rapidly away.

Up the river current he went, and vanished in the cavern. The voyagers now set themselves to patiently await his return.

Time passed.

An hour dragged by. Then another. Hardy began to advance doubts.

"Something is wrong!" he declared; "it is time that he had returned. He must have gone clear back into the cavern."

"Venturesome fellow!" said Frank, anxiously. "I fear that was an unwise move!"

"Had we not ought to do something about it?" asked the young aeronaut.

"We will wait a while longer!" said Frank.

The words had barely left his lips when a warning cry came from Barney.

"Shure, Misther Frank, there's a lot av the spalpeens comin'!"

The next moment an astounding thing happened.

Out of the cavern glided, not the craft containing Rudolph and Dorothy Fair, but three huge dugout canoes each containing a half dozen blacks.

They were not aware of the presence of the air-ship until close upon it.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH IS THE END.

WORDS can hardly depict the situation. It was an astounding one. It was hard to say which were the most surprised, the aerial voyagers or the blacks.

For a moment it was a tableau.

Then Barney cried:

"Shure, Misther Frank, phwat do yez say?"

"Annihilate them!" roared the young inventor. "Give them a good volley—don't spare one!"

The order was instantly obeyed.

Hardy and Pomp and Barney and Frank all opened fire on the black horde. Their yells filled the air.

But over went their canoes, and they dived into the current like ducks to avoid the bullets.

Some of them got safely ashore and escaped. But many sank to rise no more.

In a very short while not a bushman was in the vicinity. But the question now arose, where was Bill Rudolph?

Had he fallen into the hands of the bush natives? What was his fate?

There seemed no way to learn this. Frank was in a quandary. What did it mean?

"Let us take a trip over the mountain," suggested Hardy, "perhaps we will learn something over there."

"That won't do," said Frank.

"Why?"

"We were to remain here for the return of Rudolph. Suppose he returns after we are gone."

This was logic. Hardy admitted it, and said:

"How long ought we to wait here for him?"

"Oh, a reasonable length of time. One day at least!"

So the air-ship kept its position.

Several hours passed.

Suddenly a shower of something came down the mountain side and rattled upon the air-ship's deck. A glance showed them to be darts.

Three of them struck Barney, and all the other voyagers were hit. But thanks to the suits of mail which they yet wore—they were unharmed.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hardy; "they mean to harass us all they can. Where are those rascals hidden?"

"Bejabers, yez will foind them up there among thim rocks, bad cess to thim!" cried Barney.

"Give them a volley!" cried Frank. "They must be dislodged from there."

A sharp exchange now ensued. The bushmen sent down clouds of their darts. But no harm was done.

Whether the bullets of the aerial voyagers had any effect or not, it was not easy to conclude. But the bushmen were not dislodged.

Frank saw the enormity of this peril. Should Rudolph suddenly come out of the cavern he would be shot down like a dog.

So the young inventor suddenly raised the air ship and sailed over the spot.

A few dynamite bombs dropped among the rocks had the desired effect. The bushmen were put to rout.

As soon as he was satisfied that they were effectually cleaned out, Frank returned to his former position. What could be keeping Rudolph?

"I have it!" cried Hardy; "let me go on a little reconnoitering tour over the mountain. Perhaps I can accomplish something."

Frank looked at Hardy as if he fancied that he had taken leave of his senses.

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do," persisted the young aeronaut.

"But—think of the risk! You would certainly fall into the hands of the bushmen."

"I think not," declared Hardy. "I am willing to risk it."

"Of course you are your own master," said Frank, "but I can see little to be gained and much to be lost."

"You will not object to my trying the plan?" asked Hardy.

"Certainly not! But I warn you!"

"I will be extremely careful."

"Begorra, Misther Frank," said Barney, "yez had betther let me go with him."

But Frank would not consent to this.

"If you need help, give us a signal," he said to Hardy. "I beg of you to be very careful."

The young aeronaut hastily made ready. He wore his suit of mail, and armed himself to the teeth.

Then he left the air ship's deck, and started up the mountain side. He proceeded with due caution.

He went on until he reached an eminence from whence he had a good view of the country about. His purpose was to gain a peak near, from which he believed he could gain a view of the mountain path leading to the stronghold of Thorpe.

But the peak was yet far above him when a strange thing happened. He was held for a moment spellbound, as a wild and terrified scream reached his ears.

It was a woman's voice.

With a mad leap he burst through some bush and came upon a thrilling scene.

There, in the side of the mountain, was the open mouth of a cavern. In the cavern he saw a beautiful young girl struggling with two black men.

It was Dorothy Fair. How she had come there, or where she had come from Hardy had no time to ask. He flung himself forward upon the bushmen.

They were compelled to relax their hold upon the girl to meet him. A terrible struggle followed.

Hardy received a hundred blows from the poisoned darts, but his suit of mail protected him. In return he shot one of the blacks and knifed the other.

Then he stood before the girl he had rescued. Their eyes met. Never before in life had either seen or heard of the other.

But in that moment Hardy saw before him the most beautiful creature he had ever rested eyes upon. His heart warmed.

And she saw before her a very type of manly hero, handsome and noble and a true woman's ideal.

She blushed, her eyes fell, and he bowed to the earth in the very profusion of his gallantry.

"At your service, Miss Fair!" he said. "I arrived just in the nick of time."

"You have the advantage of me," she said, sweetly. "We have never met before!"

"No, but your fame has come to me. I am one of the party who have been searching for you!"

A glad cry of joy escaped her lips.

"And Mr. Rudolph?" she cried.

"He went into the cavern to meet you. He has not returned."

Her face paled.

"Ah, that is unfortunate," she cried. "My dugout upset, but fortunately I could swim and gained a crevice in the cavern wall. It led me into a labyrinth, where I have wandered since until a few moments ago I found my way here. Poor man! he has missed me then. Ah, I hope no harm will come to him."

"I think not," said Hardy to whom this explanation made all clear, "but I think our position here a trifle risky. Let us go down to the air-ship."

"The air-ship?" she asked.

Then as they were clambering down the mountain side, Hardy told her the whole story, even to his own personal experiences since leaving America. She was surprised.

"An air ship!" she exclaimed. "Why, how wonderful that must be. I am curious to see it!"

"Well, there it is," said Hardy.

They came out now in plain view of the Swallow. Frank and Barney and Pomp on the deck saw them coming. Their astonishment was great.

A few moments later, Dorothy Fair was aboard the air ship. She quickly told her story.

We will not dwell upon the conversation which ensued, for it was mainly reminiscent and explanatory.

But let us follow Bill Rudolph for a moment.

The plucky Australian had paddled boldly up the subterranean river for full two miles. Then upon a rock in mid-stream, he found the overturned canoe.

An awful pang came to him.

"She is drowned!" was his first conclusion. Then he discarded this. It looked to him possible that she had been overtaken and recaptured by the bushmen.

"That is the long and short of it," he muttered. "So friend Rudolph, we must keep on!"

And he did so. He even penetrated the cavern of the bushmen again. He found a crevice in the cliff, and hovered there watching and waiting.

He saw the three canoes leave which were intercepted by the air-ship's party. Then he managed to leave his dugout and take a scout through the cavern.

This convinced him of one fact, Dorothy was not there.

She had not been recaptured by the bushmen either. What then was her fate?

There was but one conclusion. He groaned aloud.

"My soul!" he muttered, "that is awful. She is drowned, and all my fault."

Finally he got back to his dugout and managed to get away down the river again. He paddled rapidly on until finally he came out again into daylight.

And there was the air-ship before him, on her deck were his companions.

"Here is Rudolph!" cried Hardy joyfully.

"Begorra, that's threue enough!" cried Barney and Pomp ditto.

Then Rudolph came wearily and sadly aboard the air-ship. As it happened Dorothy was in the cabin talking with Frank.

"Well!" cried Hardy, "we thought you lost, old fellow!"

"Well," groaned Rudolph, "I only wish I was. Only think of it, boys! She's dead, and all my fault!"

"Dead!" echoed Hardy.

"Yes—drowned! I found her overturned boat and—"

The words died away in a gurgle on the brave fellow's lips. A light form came flying out of the cabin. The appearance of a ghost could not have given him a greater start.

"Mr. Rudolph!" cried Dorothy fairly embracing him.

"Thunder an' guns!" ejaculated brave Rudolph. "Where did you come from, sis?"

The story was quickly told. Rudolph was the happiest man in Australia.

"Wait till ye see yer father," he cried. "It'll be like comin' back from the dead. I say, Mr. Reade, let's up anchor. I don't want to ever see any more of this accursed region. Let's get back to Brisbane."

The next moment the air ship was in flight for the coast and rapidly leaving the heart of Australia behind.

Why need we follow the thread of our story further?

We could find no more propitious point at which to end it. Of course that was a happy reunion in Brisbane.

Certainly the air ship's party and brave Bill Rudolph were the heroes of the hour.

And it was not forgotten to shed a few tears for the brave souls who had lost their lives that awful night in the bush. Their memory would be held ever dear.

The air ship's party could have remained forever in Brisbane. In fact one of their number had decided to do so.

This was Con Hardy. Need we give the sufficient reason?

"Tell my friends in America," he said, "that I have adopted the Antipodes as my home. I shall be very happy here, for my heart is here. Is not that enough?"

Frank Reade, Jr., laughed.

"It is," he said, "if you are satisfied. I wish you much joy."

Con Hardy prospered in Brisbane and became one of its leading citizens. And lovely Dorothy Fair made him the sweetest of wives. His partner and truest friend is Bill Rudolph.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp journeyed some further into Australia with no very exciting experiences. A few months later they sailed for home with the Swallow, where they arrived safely in due time.

They were much pleased with their Australian trip. At this point in our story let us close with best wishes for all.

[THE END.]

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